

The Days of Martin Luther King Jr.

At 5, He Read Aloud: 'Whites Only'

Third in a Series

By Jim Bishop

Martin Luther King Jr. was born on a chill day, Jan. 15, 1929, at Atlanta, Ga. The Kings were not poor. Martin Luther King Sr. was a respected Baptist pastor. His church was the Ebenezer Baptist Church, where his father-in-law had been pastor for 37 years before him.

The oldest child was Christine, born a year before Martin Luther King Jr. and two years before Alfred Daniel King. In downtown Atlanta, "Daddy" King drove his own car, refused to truckle to white tradesmen,

The King children were ready for enrollment in a black school before the age of six as the law required. Martin attended at the age of five, his mother insisting that he was six. He

proved his academic accomplishments by pointing to a sign across the street and reading it aloud: FOR WHITES ONLY. This was in the winter of 1934, and in April he told his classmates about his birthday party. "There were five candles," he said proudly. The teacher expelled him at once. At age six, he was again enrolled in the first grade, but his knowledge proved so superior that he was at once advanced a grade.

He was young when he learned what it was to be black. He and a white friend were the firmest of friends until the white boy's mother came to the door one afternoon and, with some hesitation, advised Martin to break up the friendship and "not come around here any more." The shock didn't bring tears. It stunned him.

When he was eleven, Martin was

transferred to a private laboratory school inaugurated by Atlanta University. The classes were small and the students exceptionally bright, but the school closed two years later. And yet Martin Luther King Jr. had absorbed a great deal of knowledge, and he already had a budding credo which would never be altered: All a black man had to do to be an acceptable success in a white world was to be twice as smart as everyone else and twice as good a Christian.

It was simple.

Morehouse College accepted Martin Luther King Jr. as a freshman when he was fifteen. By the time he was sixteen it was assumed by all except his mother that he would become an ordained minister and follow his father and his grandfather.

See KING, A8, Col. 1

KING, From A1

But it was not until his senior year at Morehouse that King made his decision. It was not final, but he felt his people and preach more of his "uplift" creed from a pulpit.

Martin King had a massive ego, but he did not see himself as a leader of his people, a prophet of nonviolence. The most decisive thing about Martin Luther King Jr. was his indecisiveness. He could talk "hot" on a subject one day and chill it with silence the next. He sought dates with pretty girls and, once they went out with him, moved abruptly to other girls. He set a high value on reason, and his assessment of his own intellectuality kept reminding him that nothing he had read had ever been settled by violence.

In the spring of his senior year Martin told his father that he felt the call to the ministry. His father suggested a trial church service in one of the small auditoriums in the big Ebenezer Baptist Church.

The word spread around Atlanta that a seventeen-

year-old would conduct services, and Dr. George Kelsey, head of the theological department of the college was delighted when "Daddy" King had to make an announcement that because so many people had sent word they would attend, the service would be held in the main church.

It was not a timid first speech. The boy had assurance, and his phrasing was good; but it was delivered as though he realized that he was his father's son and his grandfather's grandson and that they had, in their time, made the very stones of the church weep while he was determined to make the stones think.

Martin accepted all compliments gracefully, almost with embarrassment. He had said he could do it. He did it. At once, he made another decision. He stopped dating girls and going to dances. This was the devil's path.

He was eighteen when he was ordained a minister and—honor of all honors—was made assistant to his father as pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church. After his next birthday he was graduated from Morehouse and decided to enroll at Crozer Theological Seminary in Chester, Pa., to earn his master's degree in philosophy.

Crozer Theological Seminary was another planet to Martin Luther King Jr. There were six blacks



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Coretta Scott interrupted her studies to become a concert singer to marry Dr. King on June 18, 1953.

among ninety-four whites, and everyone appeared to be color-blind.

King was the perfect student, the do-gooder, the debater; he read like a man possessed. He was first in his class and president of the student body.

But Martin was more reckless than prudent in his relationship with women. He had glanced at the attractive white daughter of Crozer's superintendent of buildings, and she smiled at him. This led to a romance which bordered on the dangerous.

The word reached the head of the school and he called Martin and the girl in. "I'm glad you found out about it," Martin said, speaking for both, "because we decided that we wanted you to marry us!" The preacher groaned. He knew about racism all too well, and yet he sympathized with young romance. He pointed out all the reasons why such a marriage could not succeed—especi-

ally for a young man with a brilliant future.

When he concluded, Martin Luther King Jr. hung his head and admitted his logic and reason. He glanced sideways at the girl, and she shrugged and admitted that marriage to a white girl could foreclose Martin's future and that they had better forget they had met. Within a year, the girl and her family left Crozer. Years later, when he was famous, he would tell and retell the story.

Martin immersed himself deeper and deeper into his school work. For a time he dated no one. Once, on a walking trip in downtown Philadelphia, he learned that Dr. Mordecai Johnson, president of Howard University, was to lecture on a recent tour of India.

Dr. Johnson centered his talk not so much on the subcontinent as on the former South African lawyer named Gandhi. Martin King had heard and read about Gandhi before, but he could find nothing in the little bespectacled man's teachings which could be applied to the United States. Dr. Johnson changed the negative feeling to positive within an hour.

Martin left the lecture in a frenzy of excitement. He went around Philadelphia all week buying books on Gandhi and Satyagraha, the nucleus of nonviolence.

About the time Martin left Crozer to attend Boston University to study for his

doctorate, Coretta Scott was in her first term at the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston. The number of blacks in Boston was sufficient to make it improbable that this boy from Georgia and this girl from Alabama would meet.

At Antioch College, Coretta had had white boy-friends. She could smile, hold hands, kiss, and listen to the lofty promises of marriage, but, as Coretta said of one, "He didn't have the guts." Although Coretta appeared to be the softest of feminine creatures, her brain was tough and often unforgiving. Her ambition to achieve "equality" almost dominated her life.

She determined to be a concert singer. If she went home to Alabama, the best she could expect would be to sing in black churches. In the North, Coretta knew that she could be successful and appreciated.

The more firmly convinced Coretta Scott became that the North was far more liberal and palatable to her, the more Martin Luther King Jr. missed the South. A married woman friend of his said she knew a pretty girl from Alabama who was studying music. Coretta Scott was a nice girl, she assured him, an intelligent and independent girl—not one to be trifled with. King asked for her address but was refused it. Failing that, he supplied a description of himself to be given to Coretta Scott. The woman listened agape. It wasn't even close to what Martin Luther King Jr. looked like or was. What he gave her was his personal assessment of himself, physically, mentally, and morally. In addition, he fancied himself to be an irresistible Don Juan.

They dated on a tentative basis, his ardent warmth fighting the icicles of her suspicions. Throughout a cold winter, they saw much of each other, and King arrived at a swift and final conclusion: "This girl is for me. I'm going to marry her."

His protestations of eternal love were received by Coretta as the usual tactic of all males, most of whom would vow, "I love you and want to marry you," without sincerity, merely to attain the age-old goal.

By July, 1952, Coretta was convinced that her swain was sincere and in love, and

she was now certain that he was anything but a down-home preacher. Normally, love is an emotion which overtakes a romantic runner. In Corrie's case, she was one who would dwell upon all the aspects of love and marriage as a banker might read an application for a loan.

Coretta still had reservations, but she wanted to meet his parents; she wanted to see the church of his father; she had a desire to weigh what life would be like—even down to the type of living in a middle-class black community. She agreed to visit in Atlanta the first week of August. Almost from the first, Coretta realized that her competitor was King's father. The young minister loved and admired the stern and righteous old man, but Coretta

Scott wanted a marriage in which she would be the determinant, not a minister who might be inclined to make important decisions for her and her husband.

The wedding was fashionable. "Daddy" King performed the ceremony on June 18, 1953, at the home of the bride's parents in Heidelberg, Ala. Everybody who was anybody in black social life was present, and as an event, it had little in common with the crossroads blacks.

Before Coretta would agree to the marriage, she wanted it understood that she was going back to Boston in the autumn of 1953 to continue her studies at the conservatory. Young King said that this was perfect because he wanted to return to Boston University to qualify for his doctorate. The solitary schism between them, small as it was, would widen in time.

Coretta wanted a singing career in the North and nowhere else. She wanted Martin to promise that he would seek a job as minister of a Northern church or one as a teacher of theology. He could afford to smile. "We'll see," he said. "We'll see."

In an apartment near the conservatory in Boston, the young couple began a placid life. Coretta surprised and delighted Martin with her intelligent approach to personal problems, to a philosophy accommodating the dismal aspects of world affairs, to her self-assurance.

But now that they were married, and when she wasn't studying, Mrs. King was working her way slowly and accurately to the conclusion that she was going to lose the last battle, too. He would not remain in the North, even though he had already received two good offers from churches.

A letter came from the elders of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Ala., explaining that, at this time, they had no pastor and would welcome King to preach when he was in that part of the country.

On a cold Saturday in January, 1954, Martin King and his wife stood across the street and studied the plain red-brick church. It was small, even uninspiring, but it could be his. Coretta King smiled because Montgomery was near her parents' home.